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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HUNGARIAN/SLOVAKIAN RELATIONS - A LONG AND WINDING
ROAD

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[1](#)B. BUDAPEST 1209

Classified By: P/E Counselor Eric Gaudiosi, reasons 1.4 (b and d)

[1](#)1. (U) Summary. This is joint Embassy Budapest-Embassy Bratislava cable. Despite several, recent high-level meetings between Hungarian and Slovak officials, significant challenges remain to address minority-rights issues and extremism on both sides of the border. Following an impromptu November meeting between Prime Minister Gyurcsany and Prime Minister Fico, meetings between the two Parliaments' Speakers, the countries' Presidents and Foreign Ministers produced considerable press coverage but little traction. The December 15 meeting between Foreign Ministers Goncz and Kubis made slight progress to improve the dialogue, but emotions flamed by right-wing extremists in the Slovak Government and on the streets in Budapest find both Governments trying to put out fires with less time to find the arsonists. More meetings ahead in 2009. End summary.

Fear, extremism and history

[1](#)2. (U) Framed in a combination of fear and mutual mistrust that emerged during the twentieth century, Hungarian-Slovak relations continue to stumble along a path strewn with numerous obstacles - large and small - over minority rights, extremism, and history. Following the latest series of meetings between the two Prime Ministers (November 15), the countries' Presidents (December 6), and the two Foreign Ministers (December 15), common agreement to address many of the bi-lateral issues remains far down the rocky road.

[1](#)3. (U) Haunted by the territorial losses associated with the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, which includes a significant portion of southern Slovakia - the felvidek or uplands - the Hungarian fear of assimilation of ethnic Hungarians is becoming a fact, as Slovak citizens claiming Hungarian ethnicity has been dropping for decades. Conversely Slovak concerns that the Hungarian minority will demand autonomy in a country that has only existed since 1993 were reinforced when right-wing extremists entered Slovakia in November to commemorate the return of the "uplands" to Hungary in 1938 by Hitler (only to be lost again at the end of WWII). (Embassy Bratislava comment: the ethnic Hungarian population is estimated at 520,000 down from 567,000 in 1999. It is anticipated that the 2011 census will reflect a further decrease, although the precise reasons are not known. Since ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia have always been able to send their children to Hungarian-language schools, an important aspect of ethnic and cultural identity has been preserved to a large extent. Slovaks speak in resigned and occasionally bitter terms about the Slovak minority in Hungary, which is smaller and much more assimilated - where surveys indicated

that less than 15,000 identify themselves as Slovak. MFA officials note that there are only two Slovak language schools in Hungary. The disparity between the two communities helps to explain, at least partially, Slovak resistance to Hungarian suggestions about how to deal with national minorities. End comment.)

¶4. (C) While one can debate whether the political elite or the media on both sides of the border bear more responsibility for the current state of bi-lateral relations, Hungarians, in general, point to the current Slovak government coalition. As the Prime Minister's Cabinet Chief Peter Kiss recently told the Ambassador, Slovakia is still "a state whose character is emerging," challenged by "extremists within its government," referring to Slovak National Party (SNS) head Jan Slota. Kiss believes that Fico is jockeying for position domestically before their elections, trying to "get Slota's voters without Slota." Professor Laszlo Valki, Head of the Prime Minister's Foreign Policy Advisory Board echoes Kiss's view, drawing the distinction that Slovakia's extremists are in the government and not just in the streets," as in Hungary.

¶5. (C) Continuing, Kiss said that the nations of the region are "destined to cooperate" as history had shown the negative consequences of people - and governments - not working together. He noted that the EU had not automatically solved "the problem of nationalism," and said that the "desire for peace" must come before "the framework." He expressed his hope that the Slovakian ethnic Hungarian party would be open to participation in "a coalition with the right or the left." Kiss believes Hungary has had success in containing

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extremism domestically using the "limited inventory of measures" within the confines of existing law, but underscored concern regarding the "export" of the problem. He noted that the Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement has been tasked to coordinate with Bratislava on this issue, and he expects that his periodic meetings with senior Slovak officials will resume "once we are past the present period of crisis management."

Multiple proposals, slow progress

¶6. (U) Although Prime Minister Gyurcsany and Prime Minister Fico issued a four-point joint statement expressing opposition to radical ideologies, supporting good neighborly relations and intentions to strengthen cross-border cooperation at the conclusion of their November 15 meeting following soccer violence between Hungarian fans and Slovak police (ref A), Fico rejected out-of-hand Gyurcsany's follow-on six point proposal. That proposal would: establish priority national and EU funding for minority cultural and educational institutions; allow use of minority language geographical names in text books; establish a national and minority "code of conduct," and a "court of honor" that would issue public statements when someone violates the "code of conduct;" either country can initiate a joint investigation in cases of suspected minority rights violations; Slovakia should consider establishing a minority rights commissioner; propose that the Slovak National Assembly suspend and then revoke the law limiting use of foreign national symbols at Slovakian sports events. Likewise, the meeting of the two Presidents produced no concrete results.

¶7. (U) In a prelude to his December 15 meeting in Budapest with Foreign Minister Goncz, Slovak Foreign Minister Jan Kubis outlined his thoughts in a December 12 interview with Hungary's leading newspaper, Nepszabadsag. Stating that "ad-hoc, informal meetings cannot substitute for in-depth consultations," Kubis noted the excellent economic and inter-ministerial relations between the two countries. He acknowledged that there are contested issues between the two

governments, but these should be discussed in an appropriate way between us as two EU member States. Responding to Gyurcsany's six-point proposal, Kubis expressed "surprise" that it was the Hungarian Premier, not Slovak Hungarians or the Slovakian Hungarian Coalition Party which had raised these issues. Continuing, Kubis stated that, while Fico wanted to discuss "existing problems" during his November meeting with Gyurcsany, "we were instead faced with a new set of demands without any kind of diplomatic preparatory work."

We've become firefighters

18. (U) In a joint TV interview the evening of December 15 following their meeting, Kubis and Goncz both acknowledged the need to establish mechanisms and a "warning system" to avoid addressing everyday bi-lateral issues at the Prime Ministerial level. Kubis commented that "we've become firefighters, running to douse a fire whenever we see smoke."

Goncz and Kubis agreed to further reinvigorate the mixed-committee format outlined in the 14-point agreement signed in June 2007 between Fico and Gyurcsany. The two Foreign Ministers activated one of the 14 points, signing an agreement to establish a "Good Neighborly and Understanding" prize of 2000 Euros, available to an individual or organization who furthers bi-lateral relations. While both Ministers underlined the importance of dialogue to address bi-lateral concerns, Kubis restated the Slovak Government's rejection of Gyurcsany's six-point proposal. Additionally, the two Foreign Ministers agreed to disagree over the Dunaszerdahely soccer melee issue, with Kubis stating the Slovak police response was appropriate, while Goncz said Hungary awaits a review by the a committee of the COE that deals with violence at sporting events. However, they outlined plans for the two Speakers of Parliament to meet early next Spring, as well as plans for the two Prime Ministers to meet within the first six months of 2009.

The View from Bratislava

19. (C) Slovak MFA officials believe the requisite laws and mechanisms exist to manage issues related to national minorities or bilateral flare-ups. Thus, the Slovaks were both frustrated and bemused by what they characterized as FM Goncz,s repeated efforts to discuss Gyurcsany,s six points

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during the December 15 meeting, particularly since PM Fico has rejected them. However, the MFA views the meeting as having made incremental progress, e.g., with the signature of the agreement on joint awards and discussion about the possible creation of a fund to support contact between Hungarian and Slovak civic society. MFA officials also evaluated positively the decision of the Hungarian courts regarding the Magyar Garda and the planned visit of PM Gyurcsany to Bratislava on January 8 to participate in events marking the introduction of the Euro in Slovakia. Other bilateral consultations are in the pipeline, including joint meetings of six Slovak and Hungarian parliamentary committees in the first half of 2009.

10. (C) Embassy Bratislava comment: Although it's easy to identify shortcomings in the bilateral diplomatic efforts of both countries, the frequent meetings of the Foreign Ministers, the Parliamentary Speakers, and the Deputy Prime Ministers have played an important role in bringing a degree of reason to a problem that has been created largely by nationalists or extremists (or mere political opportunists) to serve domestic political purposes. It was symbolic that FM Kubis, who announced his resignation on December 16, ensured that his last official bilateral visit was to Hungary (also the site of his first official travel). PM Fico has stated that Kubis's replacement would come from the ranks of "active, career diplomats." If that turns out to be the case, we suspect that bilateral diplomatic consultations will

remain on track. We have heard from several Slovak diplomats that current Ambassador to Hungary, Juraj Migas, is a top candidate for the nomination. However, we fear that the fundamental dynamics of the problem have not yet been solved.

As we move closer to a long election season in Slovakia, we anticipate that Slovak-Hungarian relations will continue to be exploited for political gain or held hostage to political aspirations. For instance, President Gasparovic told Ambassador Obsitnik on December 18 that he would not sign the recently approved law on textbooks (septel). Whatever the stated rationale is, Gasparovic does not want to provoke the Slovak National Party before the Presidential elections in 2009. We are encouraged, however, by the growing recognition on both sides of the border on the need for more dialogue, as evidenced by the recent conference jointly organized by the Slovak and Hungarian Atlantic Commissions. Embassy Bratislava looks forward to working with Embassy Budapest to find creative ways to support such dialogue.

Comment

11. (C) Budapest comment. With every Hungarian government since the political changes in 1990 expressing some level of "responsibility" for Hungarians beyond the borders, a natural tension exists, in particular, with the Hungarian minorities in Slovakia, Romania and Serbia. That said, Hungary views its minority policy to be responsive and inclusive, and in his meeting with the Ambassador, Cabinet Chief Kiss framed the Hungarian Government's views on the issue, commenting that the government will continue a policy of "positive discrimination" in favor of minorities in Hungary while maintaining its outreach to ethnic Hungarian communities abroad.

12. (C) Budapest comment continued. That said, right-wing extremism presents a greater challenge for both countries. Commenting on recent the Slovak legislative act to restrict foreign flags at soccer matches, Hungarian MP and Chairman of the European Affairs Committee Matyas Eorsi argues that "legal measures" such as the bans adopted by Slovakia "cannot work in the long term." He said Hungary must choose the "political solution" of building a consensus, jokingly predicting success "in 200 years." However, Hungary has its own challenges in dealing with the Magyar Garda (ref b) and the right-wing Jobbik party. Foreign Policy Advisor Valki told us that the Government's approach is designed to lower the profile of the issue as it raises the substance of the dispute to international fora. In response to the Hungarian right-wing groups that entered Slovakia to commemorate the 1938 agreement with Nazi Germany, he conceded that he would be "mad if people in Russian uniforms started parading around Hungary," commenting that he has no sympathy for extremists on either side of the border.

13. (C) Budapest comment continued. Within the Hungarian political arena there is general consensus on the Government's approach to the issue. Although Fidesz President Viktor Orban recently told the International Press

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Corps that the situation was better under the 1998-2002 Fidesz Government, adding that "center-right governments are better at managing these issues," even former FM Janos Martonyi gives the Gyurcsany government rare credit for their "responsible - even elegant - position." Like many other contacts, Martonyi seems resigned to taking the high road; one contact compared it to being pregnant by commenting "we're not eating for two - we're being responsible for two." Foley